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Abstract

In 2008, Macquarie University introduced the Participation and Community Engagement (PACE) initiative, which embeds units in the undergraduate curriculum that involve learning through participation, including service learning and work-integrated learning (WIL), that is mutually beneficial to the student, the University and the partner organisation. Ethical practice is thus an integral part of this initiative. However, the issue of ethical practice in these approaches to learning has not been comprehensively addressed (Peterson et al, 2007) with research ethics in undergraduate curricula also warranting further examination and integration (Crabtree, 2008; Tryon et al., 2008). To support both students and staff at Macquarie University, we have collaboratively developed and begun to trial an innovative, holistic module to teach ethical practice in Participation units. It includes ethical theory, applied ethics, research ethics and ethical practice in PACE. The significance of this module lies in its flexibility, accessibility, and applicability to a multi-disciplinary and institution-wide audience. In this paper we evaluate the effectiveness of our module and present preliminary findings, which comment on the flexibility and usefulness of the module in supporting and preparing students for participation activities. We also reflect on how this module can be developed further and suggest avenues for future research.

Keywords

evaluating, showcasing, ethical, learning, participation:, practice, module, pace

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Ethical practice in learning through participation: Showcasing and evaluating the PACE Ethical Practice Module

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In 2008, Macquarie University introduced the Participation and Community Engagement (PACE) initiative, which embeds units in the undergraduate curriculum that involve learning through participation, including service learning and work-integrated learning (WIL), that is mutually beneficial to the student, the University and the partner organisation. Ethical practice is thus an integral part of this initiative. However, the issue of ethical practice in these approaches to learning has not been comprehensively addressed (Peterson et al, 2007) with research ethics in undergraduate curricula also warranting further examination and integration (Crabtree, 2008; Tryon et al., 2008). To support both students and staff at Macquarie University, we have collaboratively developed and begun to trial an innovative, holistic module to teach ethical practice in Participation units. It includes ethical theory, applied ethics, research ethics and ethical practice in PACE. The significance of this module lies in its flexibility, accessibility, and applicability to a multi-disciplinary and institution-wide audience. In this paper we evaluate the effectiveness of our module and present preliminary findings, which comment on the flexibility and usefulness of the module in supporting and preparing students for participation activities. We also reflect on how this module can be developed further and suggest avenues for future research.

Keywords: Ethical practice, teaching ethics, participation and community engagement, curriculum development and evaluation

Background of the PACE Initiative

Macquarie University's unique Participation and Community Engagement initiative, introduced as part of curriculum renewal, aims to prepare students for a globalising world that presents new social and environmental challenges, and to ensure that, over time, all Macquarie undergraduate students complete a 'Participation' unit as part of degree credit.

Participation units require engagement that is mutually beneficial to the student, the University and the partner organisation. Participation activities thus include, but are not limited to, service learning and WIL. Students are placed in organisations which must conform to the University's ethical standards, including integrity, respect, equality, responsibility, and justice,² and activities must align with PACE's aim of promoting the wellbeing of people and the planet. Participation units may include research-based participation activities, and students are expected to engage with the wider community in an ethical manner. Ethical practice is thus an integral part of this initiative, and students need to be prepared accordingly.

This paper discusses the motivation for, significance and development of the PACE Ethical Practice Module, which aims to help students understand the importance of ethical practice, both personally and professionally, and in participation activities. It then examines pilot evaluation data collected from a sample of Participation units using the Module during 2012. Finally, we discuss future development and research.

Motivation and significance

Participatory learning and its ethical ramifications are attracting increasing interest. Frisque *et al.* (2004, p. 29) argue that "global ethics training is necessary in a global economy if professionals and future professionals are expected to appreciate a broad range of ethical behaviours". Providing opportunities for students to participate in diverse contexts means students must conduct themselves in a responsible and ethically informed manner that respects the rights of individuals, communities and the environment (Vujakovic & Bullard, 2001).

Evidence from service learning and WIL indicates that ethical understanding is integral to the learning process (Boud, 2001; Campbell, 2011; Peterson et al, 2007). If students are to be ethical in practice, they need "to be equipped with the capacity to navigate and negotiate the ethical complexities of the workplace" (Campbell &

² <http://www.mq.edu.au/ethics/ethic-statement.html>

Zegwaard, 2011a, p. 3). This involves developing “skills within students that facilitate sensitivity to their context (such as issues of power, hierarchy, culture and position)” (Campbell & Zegwaard, 2011b, p. 209), enabling them to critically think about potential risks of their work and interactions with others, immediate and over time (Colby & Sullivan, 2008).

Teaching ethical practice in participatory learning “is complex and has not been comprehensively addressed in the literature to date” (Peterson *et al.*, 2007, p. 1. See also Frisque, Lin & Kolb, 2004). Literature indicates disagreement about approaches to teaching ethics for participatory learning (Rigby, 2009; Sims & Felton, 2006). Research ethics training for undergraduates also warrants further examination and curricular integration (Crabtree, 2008; Tryon *et al.*, 2008). Logistical difficulties, such as time and curriculum space constraints and potential lack of student interest mean that, if room for teaching on ethics is made, it is only enough to cover one or two aspects (Griffith University Work-Integrated Learning Community of Practice, 2007; Van Slyke, 2007).

In order to make Participation experiences valuable for students, Macquarie University and partner organisations, we needed to develop a multi-disciplinary approach to teaching ethics, sensitive to logistical realities.

Development of the module

In developing the module, we considered: diverse applications of ethics (Williams & Chadwick, 2012; Grunwald, 2001; Moor, 2001; Robin and Reidenbach, 1987; Newton, 2003; MacIntyre, 2006; Hazard & Dondi, 2004), the need for the module to be multi-disciplinary in nature and relevant to unit convenors and students across the institution; the imperative for flexibility of delivery; and conformity to ethical codes of practice and governing bodies (Macquarie’s Human Research Ethics Committee, the NHMRC).³ The completion of the Module is a requirement of the PACE Ethics Protocol (an ethics approval governing student research in particular Participation units). Existing policies and procedures, such as Work Health and Safety and partnership agreements, complement it.

Given its multi-disciplinary nature, the Module can be embedded into units across the institution. It was trialled in Faculty Participation Units⁴, as they are open to students of any degree programme and being new units undergoing curriculum development, and in a Sociology Research unit.

The Module builds on existing examples of online ethics courses at Macquarie University in order to provide an improved understanding of how to teach ethical practice for PACE. The Module consists of four components: ethical theory, applied ethics, research ethics and ethical practice in PACE. (See Table 1.)

This approach is novel for several reasons: first, these four components are usually taught separately at an undergraduate level, with students rarely exposed to all of them in a single unit.⁵ Ethical theory and applied ethics are typically presented as courses in Philosophy and some vocational health care courses,⁶ whilst research ethics training is not often presented as part of an undergraduate curriculum. Developing the Module at an institutional level means that ethics training is not confined to one particular program. Students who have completed the Module in one discipline are not required to repeat its core elements, though individual units may require the completion of additional discipline-specific elements. The fourth component of the module (Ethical practice in PACE) focuses specifically on ethics as it relates learning through participation⁷.

The Module consists of a bank of resources that can be accessed through iLearn (online learning management system). Resources include tailor-made video lectures discussing ethics and its relation to PACE, journal articles and websites. The selection of resources was informed by the University’s ethical standards, as well as the

³ For example, one responsibility of researchers (and research trainees) is to ‘promote adoption of this Code and avoid departures from the responsible conduct of research [and] conform to the policies adopted by their institutions and bodies funding the research’ (*Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research* (2007), Part A, section 1.6).

⁴ These units non-discipline-specific units, developed to provide an academic framework for a range of participation activities, ran for the first time in 2012

⁵ Some elements are combined in postgraduate courses on bioethics or professional ethics. For example, the The Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics’ (University of Melbourne) Postgraduate Certificate and Diploma in professional ethics, and MA in Professional and Applied Ethics.

⁶ For example, in some nursing and medical courses.

⁷ This includes WIL and service learning.

Participation Criteria.⁸ There is a core of required resources, to which convenors may add additional discipline-specific resources.

The Module can be delivered entirely online, entirely face-to-face, or in blended mode (both online and face-to-face), which facilitates flexibility and accessibility and helps address logistical issues. For example, some students study externally or via distance mode and staff may have limited time in which to deliver the content.

Students work through the module sequentially:

Table 1: Content and Structure of the PACE Ethical Practice Module

	1. Ethics and Ethical Theory	2. Applied Ethics	3. Research Ethics	4. Ethics and PACE
Video Content	Introduction to ethical theory; consequentialism and utilitarianism (Bentham, Mill); deontological ethics (Kant); virtue ethics (Aristotle).	Why be ethical; how ethics guides behaviour; examples of business, media, legal ethics; importance of reflection.	Importance of ethical research practice; examples of unethical research; The Code and National Statement; ethics as more than legislation	Ethical interaction with partner organisation; importance of reflection on own assumptions
Activities	Trolley Problem online exercise	'Should You Kill the Fat Man?' online exercise	CDC website on Tuskegee experiments	
Readings	'The Trolley Problem' (Thomson, 1985); 'Moral Saints' (Wolf, 1982)	'Applied Ethics: Naturalism, Normativity and Public Policy' (O'Neill, 2009)	NHMRC's <i>Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research & National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research</i>	'Reciprocity: An ethic for community-based participatory action research' (Maiter et. al., 2008); 'Ethical Challenges for the "Outside" researcher in Community-based Participatory Research' (Minkler, 2004).
Other resources include	Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics website; <i>Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy</i> articles	Markkula Centre for Applied Ethics website; newspaper articles (Wikileaks, social media, Murdoch scandal)	UN <i>Declaration of Helsinki</i> ; Australian Research Council website; NHMRC's <i>Code of Practice for the Care and Use of Animals for Scientific Purposes</i>	YouTube videos on collaborative community-based research; case study of ethical dilemmas in WIL and participatory learning from the disability community

At the completion of the module, students are required to undertake an online quiz consisting of short answer questions to test their comprehension of the material and to relate it to their individual participation activities. Via iLearn's completion tracking function, the quiz is not released to students until they have worked their way through each part of the Module. The quiz is a graded component of the unit and once students have successfully completed it, they are awarded a certificate of completion.⁹ The degree to which the Module achieves its goal of fostering ethical practice will be determined through ongoing monitoring and evaluation, for which a pilot study has been completed.

⁸ These include that partners must reflect the ethical standards of the University and that units develop Graduate Capabilities, including ethical responsibility.

⁹ This certificate can be used to ensure that students who have completed the module in one unit are not required to repeat it in another.

Evaluation of the module

The aim of pilot research was to evaluate the effectiveness of the Module through feedback from unit convenors and students, in order to refine the Module. After completing the Module, students were invited to complete an anonymous online survey with qualitative and quantitative questions, including whether the Module had helped to prepare them for their participation activities. Convenors were invited to take part in a semi-structured interview about their experiences of the Module's effectiveness and possible improvements.

The pilot data collected include survey responses from students, semi-structured interviews with unit convenors, and analysis of students' online discussions.¹⁰

Results

Initial survey data reveal that, overall, students found the Module to be "engaging" and the activities in particular to be "fun and simple to complete". Interviews with unit convenors also highlighted the Module's interactive nature in addition to its flexibility: "I like the module in the sense that it is a mixture of resources that a convenor can pick and choose from and deliver face-to-face or online".

Unit convenors commented that students found it helpful to have continuous access to course material (especially videos) which they could complete in their own time – important given the logistics of a student juggling unit learning with participation activities which are often located off-campus.¹¹ Video lectures and online discussions were highlighted by convenors as effective ways for students to share learning. Convenors remarked on the benefits of online discussions, observing that students were able to discuss and engage with potentially new ethical issues (many of which were new to them) in a way allowed time for them to reflect before initiating discussion: "I was so excited that on their own they stimulated discussion amongst each other...and I thought well you know you've got something if students are spontaneously responding to online resources".

All student participants agreed that the module was effective in developing their understanding of ethics in practice, while most agreed that the module was effective in preparing them for their participation activity. Online student discussions provided evidence of the ways in which the module had been helpful during participation activities. For example one student wrote:

Even though I knew and hoped that the activities and lectures we used...would be useful I did not expect it to be as useful as I have found it in practice. I found the ethics component...particularly useful as there has been several times when I have stopped in my tracks during a project and stood back and thought is this approach ethically or culturally sound? Even though they mostly were I still found it useful to detach myself and think of the tasks through a variety of different viewpoints.

Survey responses also indicate that the module challenged students to think differently. For example, one participant commented: "I have never participated in any study involving ethics or been introduced to ethics so I did find it hard to address the question[s]". However, this participant also believed that the Module was responsible for "opening [their] eyes to ethical practice".

As students began to understand the relevance ethics training had to their participation activities, convenors observed students beginning to view situations through an ethical lens. One convenor reflected: "I did have one student who was almost finished her activity...she made a couple of comments about how having gone through the ethics module her approach to certain things was different as a result of thinking more ethically and philosophically about things".

This is further indicative of the overall importance of developing an ethics module for undergraduate programs that involve service learning and WIL.

¹⁰ More data from the pilot is due to be collected in December, but could not be incorporated due to timing.

¹¹ Some students are employed and some students undertake activities overseas with sporadic Internet access. Hence, flexibility to complete the Module in one's own time is crucial.

Future development and research

Evidence from the pilot evaluation suggests that learning about ethical practice prior to their participation activity can empower students to make appropriate decisions, resulting in a better experience for students and partner organisations. Further development of the module is necessary, and based on pilot data, soon to be implemented changes include tools to stimulate additional online and face-to-face discussion, a video and accompanying resources about ethics and Indigenous-related participation activities, as well as a separate 'stream' of resources for those students who are undertaking research¹².

In order to assess students' ethical behaviour and gain a greater understanding of the value and implications of the module, however, future research should also include students' interaction with others involved in PACE, for example, interviews with partner organisations, workplace supervisors, team leaders and host communities. These will begin in early 2013, when all inaugural participation activities are complete, and all partners have experience on which to draw.

In seeking student feedback post-participation activity and to further promote student reflection as part of their participation in the research, it would be valuable for students to provide an example of how they applied what they learnt in practice. Similarly, having pre- and post-participation activity surveys in order to better discern stages of learning will help demonstrate the impact of the module on student learning. Finally, collecting additional data on the unit of study, discipline background of students, year of degree study, gender, and other demographics would provide further indicators for consideration.

While we have identified a range of areas for further development and research of the module it is clear that the significance of the module presented lies in its flexibility, accessibility, and applicability to a multi-disciplinary and institution-wide audience. This initial evaluative research on the module makes a contribution to the developing research on ethics and learning through participation.

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¹² This includes review of the PACE Ethics Protocol and resources on 'research ethics in practice' to ensure students make the connection between ethical research methods and conducting themselves in the field (See also Guillermin and Gillam, 2004).

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